

THE SUN

San Bernardino County's Newspaper

Monday, January 15, 2007

Record freeze strikes region

Farms, shelters suffer but cope

By Guy McCarthy
and Gina Tenorio
Staff Writers

With a freeze warning in effect Sunday, homeless shelters scrambled to make more room, citrus growers braced themselves for another near-sleepless night, and fire crews raced from call to call as burst pipes flooded homes and businesses in San Bernardino County.

"We've had maybe double the calls we have on an average day," said county fire-dispatch supervisor Tom Barnes. "Almost all of them have been weather-related."

Freezing temperatures ruptured water pipes at Santa Fe Assisted Living Center in the 55400 block of Santa Fe Trail in Yucca Valley. Six inches of water flooded half of the facility, bringing down ceiling tiles and affecting 15 rooms.

No one was injured, but crews spent hours helping staff clean some of the mess and check on patients, Barnes said.

Several struggling families and homeless people were badly affected by the temperatures. The Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County, in cooperation with state and local emergency and health officials, extended help to those they called most vulnerable, urging them to prepare for the extreme weather.

They provided sleeping bags and blankets to cold-weather shelters to accommodate the overflow of clients.

The Community Action Partnership helped the Salvation Army put up a few families in motels Saturday and Sunday after the shelter became full, said Maj. Russell Fritz, who oversees the Salvation Army's Kingman Street Shelter.

Typically, the shelter gets 135 to 140 people a night, nearing capacity, he said. But more walked through its doors over the cold weekend.

"The weather simply makes it worse," Fritz said.

For farmers, the pressure was on to save their crops.

"I've seen worse freezes in

See **WEATHER** | Page B4

WEATHER

Continued from Page B1

the past 30 years, but this is the worst since 1990," said Steve Buoye, 48, who oversees about 40 acres of orange groves in east Redlands.

Buoye guessed he had slept four hours total in the past four nights. He and his family have hustled to keep water running, oil burning and fans blowing in orchards to reduce damage to still-ripening crops.

"This is the first time we smudged since 1990," Buoye said, referring to lighting pots of oil to keep fruit trees warm, which they did Sunday night and early today. "We'll do it again tonight for sure."

Groves in San Bernardino and Riverside counties are just a fraction of the state's \$1 billion citrus industry, said Joel Nelson of California Citrus Mutual in Tulare County. But the two-county region's estimated \$45 million in citrus crops were almost surely impacted by the record freeze, Nelson said Sunday.

"There's been significant damage across the state," Nelson said. "There's still a lot of good fruit out there. But the freeze event

is not over. It's too cold right now to assess the extent of the problem."

Freezing temperatures have dipped low enough to damage citrus fruit, but not trees, Nelson said.

The cost of the damage to locally produced crops like citrus and avocados could be passed on to grocery-store customers, said Bob Knight, general manager of the sole remaining citrus-packing plant in San Bernardino County, Redlands Foothill Groves.

"The price of oranges through retail chains may go up because there has been so much damage across California and Arizona," said Knight, who is also a volunteer with the Inland Orange Conservancy. "Citrus and avocados are a couple of the larger cash crops in San Bernardino and Riverside counties."

In Mentone, produce retailer Charlie Zimmerman, 54, called the weekend freeze the worst he'd seen in more than 20 years.

"Price increases depend on how hard the Central Valley gets hit," Zimmerman said. "I've heard they had problems just like here. If it got anywhere near as cold up there, they got a lot of damage. People

could see prices go up on everything from lettuce to tomatoes."

In the Inland Empire, growers water the ground to keep warm air rising and run fans to keep that air circulating so damaging frost cannot form on the fruit and trees.

Bill Watkins, 53, said his five acres of citrus off Florida Street and Greenspot Road benefit from a wind-shadow in the mountains east of Highland.

"We're just small potatoes over here. We don't even have any anti-frost measures," Watkins said Sunday. "But we're fortunate. We have a kind of banana belt here where we don't get near the wind they do west of here."

In 2005, San Bernardino County had roughly 3,000 acres of citrus groves remaining, and Riverside County had about four times that acreage, Nelson said. Encroaching development in the past two years has reduced the citrus country in both counties.

Contact writer Guy McCarthy at (909) 386-3872 or via e-mail at guy.mccarthy@sbsun.com.

Contact writer Gina Tenorio at (909) 386-3854 or via e-mail at gina.tenorio@sbsun.com.